

The Lost Fleet

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Summary: A group of Spartan IIs is hastily assembled by the UNSC's most secretive branch ONI and sent into the unknown as they investigate the mystery of the disappearance of an entire fleet.

1. Entremont Pass

****Canton System, Valais, Entremont Pass, October 23 2538****

A rainstorm lashed the heavily forested hillsides of Entremont Pass, the stars and moon were shrouded by the dense cloud layer that filled the skies leaving the basin bathed in near complete darkness apart from a few dim floodlights. In the distance you could make out the city of New Verbier, it was normally a brilliant mass of lights that could be seen for miles around, one of the gems of humanities colonies. Its skyline used to be dominated by four great spires that rose high towards the stars, each gloriously illuminated and standing proud as a monument to humanities reach. But now only two of the four still stood, the city that had been so great and so majestic was lit by a dull orange glow, New Verbier was burning. But then, all went black.

"For god's sake" Maximilian grunted as his HUD went dark. Frustrated he gave the side of his Mark IV MJOLNIR helmet a tap and it fizzed back on for a brief second before continuing to flicker on and off.

The Spartan couldn't help but wondered if his old armour set wouldn't have been stricken with these kinds of glitches. But with the torrential rainstorm thundering down around him, he guessed it must have just been the weather wrecking havoc with his systems. He doubted regular MJOLNIR specs were equipped for this kind of network.

With one last heavy slap Maximilian's visor flickered back into life and he could see once again. The Spartan gave his eyes a moment to

become readjusted to the green hue of the night vision, and there it was just as he had left it, New Verbier looking forlorn in the distance.

"Are you ok Max?" Colonel Adrian Durrenberger said from the Warthog's drivers seat.

"Just the rain messing with my helmet" Max said before he pulled up the hood on his thick poncho

"Well if that's the worst of our problems then I think we are lucky" Durrenberger said

"Indeed" Maximilian agreed, there was a lot more to worry about on this planet than a few technical problems, annoying as they may be. Thinking this Maximilian picked up a pair of military issue thermal binoculars and hauled his large form up from the front seat of the Warthog so he was standing and poking his head and shoulders out above the windshield. As he looked through there was just blackness until he flicked the switch on the side of the lens, and then in that blackness were the white hot figures of people and the shapes of vehicles moving along road that carved through the middle of the narrow valley.

Maximilian hated having to use Entremont Pass to get the civilians out; it was high sided and covered in trees, perfect for an ambush. But the pass was the fastest way to get from New Verbier to well the hidden UNSC base of operations called Fort Grief, and at the moment time was precious. All the people who marched an undisciplined march through the valley were due to be loaded onto star ships and evacuated off the planet and it was up to Maximilian and all the other members of the marine core who now lined to valley to make sure they got there safely. While he didn't really like feeling that they were all running they had no choice, the military presence on Valais was always small so as soon as it was obvious that covenant forces had entered the Canton system it was a full operational evacuation of the planet, they couldn't afford to see 100,000 colonists be brutally murdered by the hateful alien horde.

"What do you see?" Durrenberger piped up as Maximilian's thoughts became full of angry as they drifted to the Covenant; Adrian's interjection was a nice snap back to reality.

"Nothing out of the ordinary" Maximilian said, lowering the field glasses.

But just as was about to sit down there was a brilliant flash of light that caused Maximilian to slam his eyes shut as his night vision went ballistic. A few seconds later the sound wave of a huge explosion washed over the valley, Maximilian, momentarily blinded fumbled with his helmet; managing to switch the night vision off before he could finally look down the valley and see what the hell was happening. The Spartan blinked his eyes a few times and once they his vision had been cleared of blotches he could see all clearly, he heard Adrian utter 'my god'.

Maximilian could see that a giant pillar of pulsating purple plasma energy had appeared above New Verbier, a covenant plasma bombardment; they were beginning to glass the planet. Hanging low in the sky like some huge bulbous aerial tadpole, illuminated by the beam that it

spat out from its belly, was a covenant Assault Carrier. Maximilian gripped the Warthog's roll cage tightly, he imagined the city that just three days before he had seen as a bustling metropolis now being destroyed and turned to glass, anyone left in the city was now most definitely dead. Even though the well-travelled Spartan II had seen this many times before it still made his stomach turn, he looked down and noticed his grip had left a dent in the steel roll bar of the warthog.

Then Maximilian had a feeling that all was not well, it was the simple and unimpeachable fact that if he was an overzealous fatical alien wanting to exterminate a species that he would not be content with just glassing an already ruined city, he would want the people dead, all of them, and with those people in such a situation as Maximilian and the refugees found themselves in now, the time was perfect.

"Sir?" Maximilian said calmly.

"Yeah Max?" The Colonel said as he was lighting up a small cigarette

"Put the marines on high alert and get the refugee's back in the trucks, we need to get out of here as quickly as possibly"

"What? Do you see something?" Durrenberger blew smoke out into the air and sat deeply back in the warthog's seat still, he clearly did not share Maximilian's concern.

"Not yet, just a feeling at the moment" Maximilian said before he slipped into his thoughts.

The Spartan ignored Durrenberger's sanctimonious lecture about the importance of keeping people calm and the fact he couldn't work on feelings he needed facts. A thousand different situations whizzed through Maximilian's mind, he calculated each of them and produced their outcome, how would they attack? By air? No, that would be picked up by radar immediately, it would have to be on foot and quiet, there were thousands of people down there if one person saw them their whole operation could be compromised as the marines would snap to attention and the Warthog's and Scorpions guarding the column of people would immediately bring their weapons to bear. Maximilian connected the dots and decided the most likely situation was a ground attack by a group of stealth operatives maybe about four dozen strong, that's all they needed, a quick and efficient strike to take out a large proportion of the armed forces defending the refugee's, cause panic, cause them to spread out into the forest were they could be picked off one by one by snipers most likely located on the high shoulders of the valley. The attack must have been imminent they were now deep into Entremont, the perfect situation, the covenant leaders were near military geniuses, there was no way they could pass this up, but he still needed to prove something, Durrenberger was being stubborn, that typical military hard arse stubborn, even though he meant well.

But then Max thought, the Ridges. The Spartan grabbed a sniper rifle from the back of the Warthog's flat bed and swung it round to the top of the Valley's crest opposite them; it was completely barren apart from a few rocky outcrops, that is where they would be. In his left ear he could hear Durrenberger saying 'what are you doing' but the

Spartan pulled the trigger and fired. Taking the kick of the rifle well Maximilian waited for a fraction of a second, keeping his keen eyes poised on where he had fired. As he predicted a splatter of purple blood coated the rocks and the corpse of an elite became visible as its active fizzed and died, the Spartan knew it.

"What the hell!" Durrenberger said his eyes now behind the field-glasses "How did we miss them?"

"They are blocking our thermals, radio the marines and tell them to get the god damn colonists back in the trucks and get out of here!" Maximilian said throwing the sniper into the back of the truck "Quickly, they will be mobilising any second"

Once again just as Maximilian predicted, as soon as Durrenberger had spoken those few words into the two way radio, there was the sound of gunfire echoing throughout the valley, the elites had wanted this calm and quiet, Maximilian had made sure it was loud and messy, humans always did better when it was loud and messy. The Spartan dropped back into his seat and yelled for the colonel to drive.

The warthog began to tear through the forest, heading straight for the column of terrified civilians; Maximilian was wondering how many colonists and marines were already dead. No, he couldn't think about that, a lot more would be dead if it wasn't for him, he had to keep focused. The Spartan picked up the shotgun that lay next to his sniper and checked it for ammo. They would have energy-swords and plasma repeaters he thought, and with the substantial amount of cover down at the bottom of the basin as long as the fight stayed in the proximity of the narrow road, the M90 would do nicely.

The warthog slipped and skidded down the incline towards the refugees, churning up the dirt and leaf litter as it went, Durrenberger fought the steering wheel to keep control and the rear slapped

left and right on the muddy ground, just narrowly avoiding the trees that started to get thicker as they delved deeper into the valley. The truck careered over a fallen tree and gained air, they could now see the forest road and the screams and gunfire became much more distinct.

Maximilian's well trained eyes then became fixed upon the first of the Covenant he saw, an Elite, Minor class, it had its plasma repeater raised, approaching the civilians. In his mind the Spartan counted range, 150 feet, 100 feet, 50 feet, 25 feet, and then he jumped. As the Spartan hurled himself from the speeding hog and the elite spun round and let out a defiant roar, but it was too late, Maximilian tackled the alien to the ground hard. The Spartan scrambled to his feet quickly, quicker than the elite, by the time he was at full height the Elite still had its hands in the dirt. Maximilian drew his shotgun but decided to conserve ammo, this was an easy kill, he kicked the Elite solidly in the chest as it tried to claw its way back to its feet, the alien keeled over and Maximilian drove his size 15 boot into its jaws sending splashes of purple blood up his power armour leg.

The Spartan dashed forward and he spied another two elites nearby. They saw him too; he would not have the luxury of the surprise this time. They both opened their split jaws wide in a roar of fury as

they raised their Plasma Repeaters and fired, spitting scorching blue energy at the Spartan. Maximilian dodged but felt the impact of two of the superheated plasma bolts strike him, one in the stomach, one in the thigh, the Spartan ignored the pain, he and his armour could take it. Maximilian dived and rolled raised his shotgun, firing off two shots, taking down the first of the Sangheili, at this sight the second one wavered, that was its last mistake, soon the elite found itself staring down the barrel of Maximilian's M90, he pulled the trigger, it fell.

Looping forward Maximilian started down the road, dealing with any Elite he came across quickly and efficiently, saving civilians and marines on all fronts but still the dead littered the roadside. Thoughts ran rampant through the Spartan's mind; he was supposed to be watching over them, how the hell he had let this happen.

Maximilian shoulder charged another alien to the ground as it was about to cut down a family it had pulled from one of the Refugee trucks, he raised the M90 shotgun and was prepared to pull the trigger, but the Elite grasped the barrel and wrenched it from his hands casting it into the undergrowth. Maximilian was taken aback and lost his balance, giving the Elite a moment to pounce forward and return to its feet. The Spartan regained his composure and in the dim light that illuminated the valley he could plainly see this Elite was something more than just one of those like he had disposed of already, the crests along its helmet, fine lines of blue across its burgundy combat harness, this one was a Zealot.

The Elite picked its energy sword back up and stood its ground, raising itself to its full colossal height it let out a hiss of 'demon' as it approached. Maximilian dived for a DMR that had been dropped by a fallen marine, he gripped the stock and brought the rifle to bear but the elite was quicker. Before he could get off a shot the Zealot's blade had gun's barrel right off. Maximilian dropped the now useless weapon and leapt back, dodging the Zealot's second strike, then ducking to avoid the third, before throwing himself at the Elite in a hope to disarm it. But the Zealot caught him and the Spartan found himself with its large four fingered hand wrapped tightly around his throat. Maximilian kicked out at the Elite but it wouldn't let go, he clenched his hands around its thick and scaled powerful arm and started to squeeze, digging his fingers deep into the flesh and drawing blood but the Zealot was unrelenting.

The Elite roared in triumph and held the Spartan aloft raising its blade to deliver the final blow; Maximilian frantically struggled, he couldn't give in now, he had to think. But then the Spartan saw it, a pair of little blue spheres on the Elite's belt, plasma grenades, instinctively the Spartan grabbed one just as the Elite raised him up and took him out of reach. The spartan primed the grenade and drove it into the elite's mouth. The Zealot's orange eyes went wide with fear and it let out low gurgling and grunting sounds, its jaws flapping helpless as the Spartan shoved the grenade down its throat, its vice grip released and Maximilian fell to the ground, scurrying away as fast as he could before a blue explosion blossomed behind him.

The Spartan hauled himself to his feet, he breathed heavily, his whole body ached, but he knew this wasn't over yet, the refugees were now further up the road from where he was standing, it appeared he

had delayed the first Covenant strike team enough to allow the Marines to form an effective defence, and now with the alien's leader dead they needed to regroup. Maximilian looked towards the sky as rain smattered his silvered visor, Phantom's passed overheard with UNSC Hawk's in pursuit. Towards New Verbier the Supercarrier was starting to move forwards, ominous in the night.

Maximilian looked around for a moment, many were dead, military personnel and civilians alike, while the elites now lay with them he did not take satisfaction from this, he should have been better, he wished he had been better. The Spartan solemnly removed the dog tags from a number of marines who lay dead in the undergrowth before starting to sprint down the road to catch up with the convoy. But as he ran a little symbol appeared in the top right hand corner of his HUD, it took him a moment to register what it meant but then he recognised it, a little black pyramid white pyramid in a circle, the symbol of ONI.

2. Unyielding Inquisition

****Interstellar Space, Sector B-078, Unyielding Inquisition, October 23 2539****

A symbol flicked into life on the HUD of Rebecca's EVA helmet, she wondered if it was a glitch at first, but it stayed on. She couldn't think about that now, she had other things to consider.

The Spartan sprinted down the amethyst coloured hallway, around her she could hear plasma bolts impacting with the walls, but she didn't care, Grunt's were lousy shots, all she had to do was weave a bit and they wouldn't know where to look. While the idea of boarding a Covenant ship and disabling it solo had seemed alike a difficult task Rebecca just took it in her stride, she liked the challenge, and in fact she had been disappointed it had all felt rather easy.

A green bolt of plasma crossed close to the Spartan's head, how annoying she thought, that may have charred her armour, and the grunt who fired hadn't even charged it enough to do any serious damage. So as she ran Rebecca casually unclipped a frag grenade from her belt turned round and threw it back down the corridor, she thought about blowing a kiss as well but she doubted the grunts would understand if she was mocking them. There was the sound of the explosion and some excitable yet terrified squeals and soon enough the plasma fire thinned out. The Spartan slowed to a trot and came to a large set of doors that sat buckled bent inwards, plaintively sliding back and forth as they tried to close. Rebecca held casually held and the door open and found herself back in the hanger, she may as well go out the same way she came in she thought and she started for the large energy shields that separated the interior of the ship from the vacuum of space.

Rebecca looked around, she couldn't help like feel she had made a mess of the place, the hanger was full of dead Grunts, dead Jackals and dead Elites, as well as the wreckage of a Banshee and a couple a Seraphs hanging precariously from their badly damaged clips on the roof of the hanger. Oh well she thought, it wasn't like the corvette was ever going to be used by anyone ever again anyway. From her belt she unclipped a small cigar shaped detonator and ran her thumb over the tiny button. But before she pressed down on the switch and

finished up she heard the sound of an inhuman voice shouting wildly from behind her. Turning, Rebecca saw hobbling across the hanger, one arm and leg both badly injured and weeping blood, looking very pale, was the Minister of Penance, one of the Covenant's important legates.

Rebecca had thought she had finished him off on the bridge but it looked like the frail looking creature had some fight left in him yet. When she had casually broke her way through the door's to the Unyielding Inquisition's CIC she had been pleasantly surprised by the sight of the minister cowering behind his elite guards, it wasn't often you got little perks like this on a mission. Originally she had just been dispatched to disable the corvette so the UNSC Ivanhoe, the damaged, smaller and significantly less armed frigate that she served on, could pass safely, but now she had been given the chance to eliminate a rather upstanding and powerful member of covenant society.

"Stop Demon!" The minister wheezed, obviously not used to such physical activity as walking let alone walking with a bleeding leg and mangled arm.

Rebecca pulled out her SMG and pointed it at him, even though she felt confident nothing could go wrong now she had always been told by Chief Petty Officer Mendez to never get cocky.

"Why do you butcher the seekers of Truth and the Journey" The minister continued, constantly approaching Rebecca with his good arm outstretched "We are trying to cleanse the universe of those unworthy of the Forerunners, we are the chosen inheritors"

He was rambling, Rebecca couldn't believe he expected her to suddenly come round and agree with the cleansing of humanity so she just began to back off and ignore this new arrival.

The minister carried on talking all this incoherent rubbish about the journey and the forerunners that made no sense to Rebecca so she holstered her SMG and began to make her way towards the hanger bay doors. Rebecca unclipped the detonator from her combat belt once again and thought back to the minister behind her, she couldn't help but think about how ridiculous there reasons for this war were. But even though their cause was absurd and fanatical they had the technology to win, this made her heart sink for a second but seeing how pathetic the creature behind her was it was clear humanity did have its chances. The creature behind her was weak, the creature behind her was nothing but a glorified cult leader, the creature behind her was still behind her, and with that it clicked. Rebecca cursed herself; despite even considering Mendez's words moments earlier she had done it again, she had got cocky. Wheeling about as quickly as possible the Spartan saw the Minister of Penance bearing close upon her, an energy sword raised and a look of incomprehensible rage, fear and hate burning behind his eyes and forcing himself through the pain that racked his body. Rebecca took a step back and pressed the detonator.

The lights of the hanger dimmed to nothing and the energy shields disappeared. Rebecca felt her MJOLNIR armour pressurize as she became weightless, the minister began to drift up off the floor as well, his spindly arms clawing at his own throat as he began to go blue. The Spartan kicked off from the edge of the corvette and began to float

away into the endlessness of space. She drifted further and further away and soon she could see the whole of the Covenant capital ship, all its lights were off, its engines were shut down and all aliens aboard were now dead. The EMP had done its work and Rebecca had had a near perfect operation, she would leave the business with the minister off the report.

Rebecca sat and just let the weightlessness take her for a while. Having the feeling of none of her muscles under any stress was just the best sensations she could think of and one of the reasons why she loved doing operations in deep space. On all other missions there was no moment where you could feel utterly at ease, even when you weren't in the battlefield, you were always trekking, driving, climbing, even just riding in a vehicle you had to tense yourself to avoid smacking your head on a roll bar or having your teeth shaken as you bumped along rutted and cratered roadways. But while you are in space just lying there, not a single muscle in your body working, just you staring at the stars and dancing with the nebulas, wafting through the abyss.

Rebecca took a moment to savour the feeling of complete relaxation but soon she saw the frigate UNSC Ivanhoe begin to come out from behind a nearby asteroid that it was hidden behind and start on its way, cruising silently in the vacuum towards the floating Spartan. Rebecca reached round to the small of her back and felt for a canister, she found it strapped to the back of her belt and pulled the pin. A burst of gas fired, propelling her gently towards the ship, it was standard issue for Spartan in deep space operations to have such a failsafe. The grey slab that was the Ivanhoe grew larger and larger in her view as it got closer and soon it was upon her. Rebecca opened up the canister once more, expelling the last of the gas and sent herself into frigate's hanger bay.

As Rebecca's body moved through the hanger shield door and she felt the weird sensation that it was to go from being weightless to feeling all of her mass being pulled down by the ship's artificial gravity. For a moment the Spartan felt disorientated and even slightly sick, but she found her footing again and stood upright, to the applause of the Marines and crewmen who were gathered in the hanger. While they were impressed they were relieved if anything, a UNSC frigate would without a doubt incur massive losses if engaged by a Covenant corvette and with one as battered and bruised as the Ivanhoe, there was no way they would have come out alive. The crowd of marines and swabbies began to part and let through the very well composed but frail man that was the ship's captain John Rumsfeld, instinctively Rebecca saluted.

"At ease Spartan" The Captain said, Rebecca let her body relax, she didn't particularly like the whole chain of command thing but she had to respect it.

"That must be a record" Rumsfeld continued "Boarding and taking a Corvette in just under an hour, dam good work Spartan"

"Glad you're impressed" Rebecca quipped, Rumsfeld laughed.

"Indeed, well still, on a more serious note, Thank you, you saved alot of lives today Spartan" Rumsfeld said with a respectful nod followed by a salute, the whole of the crowd behind him joined him in this gesture, Rebecca couldn't help but smile behind her visor and

feel slightly flattered.

"Thank you sir" Rebecca said before saluting back at the crowd in front of her.

"You are dismissed"

"Thank you sir" Rebecca dropped the salute and quickly walked off to her quarters, she was quite tired, but then her eyes moved to the top of her HUD and saw the little symbol that had appeared back on the Unyielding Inquisition. She had completely forgot about it, but she knew what it meant, the symbol of ONI.

Rebecca returned to her quarters, it was separate from the other grunts but in no way lavish like the cabins of commissioned officers, it simply had a small iron framed cot, a large footlocker and a small bathroom with sink, toilet and shower. Rebecca raised her hand to the her neck, she fiddled with a clip that connected the rest of her power armour to her helmet and then lifted the large dome of the EVA helm off, letting her long blonde hair gracefully fall over her shoulders. The Spartan pulled off each element of the power armour and stacked them all on the footlocker until she was left just standing in her skin tight under suit, she felt liberated.

Rebecca sat back on her bed and picked up a touch screen tablet from on top of the footlocker, she then swung her legs up onto the mattress and laid back on the pillows. Just as she had been relishing it in deep space she was relishing it now, the feeling of complete ease, she cherished these moments when she could get them. In fact she hated to sleep, since sleeping was a moment that could be spent at ease and just distressing, yet when you fall asleep, all that just seems to be lost in an instant. The Spartan held up the tablet and tapped in her pass code to access her personnel database, she knew what she expected to find now, and there it was, in the corner of the tablet was the flashing ONI symbol. Rebecca sighed and tapped it with one of her dainty fingers, the pad's screen went black for a second before the symbol of ONI appeared again and a text scroll began to appear.

****Hello SPARTAN Rebecca-108,****

****ONI has conscripted you for a class V classified operation;****

****we are not a liberty to disclose such information over the BattleNet so you will be collected****

****from your current location on UNSC DAWN UNDER HEAVEN. We look forward to your presence.****

****Regards, ONI****

How delightfully vague Rebecca thought, no details of a mission, not even a name of who her commanding officer would be, she tapped off the message but it didn't work, she tried again but the pad was frozen on this message. She sighed again, as much as a problem she had with the traditional chain of command she had more of a problem with these pen pushing info-bugs who ran ONI. Rebecca tried many different Operations on her touch pad but nothing worked it, but then there was another text scroll under the ONI logo.

****We regret to inform you that since this message is of the highest possible security a virus has been uploaded to your individual BattleNetTouchPad****

**** ,it is currently destroying any history of this message and thus majority of the information stored on this device.****

****You have our apologies****

****Regards, ONI****

Rebecca once again sighed in exasperation and placed the touch pad down on the floor and just lay back, while she didn't like to do it, she supposed she best go to rest if something could appear at any time to retrieve her. So the Spartan closed her eyes and reluctantly let the comfort of a proper bed take her.

3. Fort Glory

****Epsilon Eridani System, Circumstance, Fort Glory, October 25 2539****

Ivan-015 stood on the large landing pad that sat beside the tall concrete tower that was the centrepiece of UNSC Fort Glory. Not two days ago while he was out on patrol a small icon and flashed up on his visor and now he found himself stood on the snow covered landing pad in the Northern Mountains of Planet Circumstance. Ivan couldn't guess what ONI wanted with him, he had never had the pleasure, if it could be described at that, of working with them unlike many Spartans who regularly interfaced with them.

Maybe Ivan's type wasn't normally what they looked for in a Spartan, he was stiff necked and dogmatic yet utterly honourable, not really matching the pragmatic 'by any means necessary' type they really wanted to have when partaking in the kind of dark and unfavourable missions that they normally dealt with. Ivan liked to keep in with the rank and file with boot on dirt most of the time, while he was technically an officer of the Navy he spent most his time when he could planet side. He wondered if this maybe this was another reason why ONI never approached him before, he was too much of a grunt for them.

But for now for some reason ONI wanted him now and they were one of the most powerful and influential divisions in the UNSC, there was nothing he could really do to get out of this, hell, had almost begged Brigadier-General Gagarin to try and keep him on station on Circumstance. But of course there was nothing Gagarin could do and he told Ivan that when ONI are involved, forget everything you think you know about chain of command.

Ivan checked his TACPAD, the ONI agents were due to arrive any minute. He looked towards the horizon and at first there was nothing, but then a black shape appeared that began to grow larger as it was approached the fort. The shape was obscure at first but gradually it became more defined and Ivan recognised it as the boxy silhouette of a pelican. The Spartan noticed as it got closer it looked very different to the standard issue military drop ships, while they were a mottled shade of green this one was jet black, the normally clean and very aerodynamic nose now had a very large gauss cannon and two

70mm chain guns slung below of it, its rear engines and wings were enlarged and at the rate it was approaching it was moving much faster than the standard craft.

The snow sat on the landing pad whipped up like a miniature blizzard around Ivan as the unusual pelican slowed and began to land. It deployed its landing gear with a mechanical hiss and the heavy whine of the engine grew quieter. There was a crunch on the snow as the drop ship sat down, Ivan picked up his heavy pack and approached the still closed loading ramp.

The pelican's engines still hummed and had a wash of hot exhaust coming from them, but Ivan's armour soaked it up and the Spartan waited patiently for whoever was inside to make their move. With a rush of gas the hatch began to slower lower before hitting the landing pad with a loud clang. Two men strode down the ramp, tall, lean and clean shaven, clad in all black uniforms with boxy caps and heavy boots, they each bore the insignia of ONI on their breast and had a M6 pistol strapped to their thigh.

"Ivan-015?" One of the men shouted down over the pelican's engines

"Yep" Ivan simply said, he didn't really think the question was worth asking let alone answering with more than a simple begrudging 'yep'

"Good" The other man said

"Come aboard" The first man said before they both turned on their heels and made their way back into the craft.

Ivan slung his pack off his back and marched aboard, ducking his head to avoid smacking it on the top of the pelican's cabin, he was tall even for a Spartan II. The two ONI men sat on one side of the pelican so Ivan sat on the other and began to buckle his harness, he was never a particularly great fan of flying but it was essential in art of soldiering so he made do. There was a loud roar as the Pelican began to lift off with its hatch still open, gradually closing as it moved away from Fort Glory, Ivan watched as the grey tower and the mountains began to disappear into the distance as the Pelican jetted off, but the hatch slammed shut, taking the sound of the large engines with it. There was near silence the cabin, the two men sat opposite him made Ivan uneasy.

"Ivan-015" One of them again said before extending a black gloved hand, "Pleasure to meet you"

The Spartan shook it firmly and then shook the other man's as well; he wanted to make clear who was in control here.

"Good to meet you" Ivan said in with his low husky voice "Well since you know my name; I guess I should know yours"

"First Lieutenant Cartwright"

"First Lieutenant Wainwright"

They were Ivan's superiors, 'great' he thought.

"So are you guys heading up this operation?" The Spartan continued

"No"

"No?"

"No"

Taken aback by this Ivan said "Well then can you tell me anything about..."

The Spartan was cutshort and Cartwright said "About the operation? No, that all awaits you once we rendezvous with the ship"

"What ship?"

"The ship"

"Which ship is 'the ship'?"

"The ship in orbit around this world that we are due to rendezvous with" Wainwright raised his pencil eyebrow in a condescending manner and Ivan felt exhausted by this all already, secret ships, secret operations, he missed Fort Glory's barracks already.

Ivan settled back into the seats and decided to buckle up, fastening the straps tightly over his heavy armour, as much as hated all this business he was in it for the long haul. Cartwright and Wainwright kept silent for the most part but Ivan could almost feel them staring at him, he felt like they didn't trust him, hell, he KNEW they didn't trust him. ONI agents were notoriously suspicious of the II's, Ivan didn't really understand why.

After a short while longer riding on the mysterious Pelican Ivan felt them pass into space and then he heard the hum of the engines slow, they were approaching their destination and hopefully for him, some answers.

4. UNSC Omaha

****Epsilon Eridani System, UNSC Omaha, October 25 2539****

Cyrus-142 stood on the observation deck of the UNSC Omaha that was sat in orbit above Circumstance. He looked through the thick Perspex at the large grey planet; most of it was covered in a thick stormy looking cloud layer that had electrical storms dancing through it. As Cyrus watched a small black shape burst through the grey clouds and began to head straight for them, good he thought, the last member of the team was about to come aboard.

Already two Spartans had been collected, Maximilian-055 and Rebecca-108, this last man was Ivan-015. He wasn't Cyrus's first choice to be the fourth in the team but he would do, he was a Spartan just like the others even though he did lack a bit of the flare that he thought ONI would want from a Spartan on one of their missions. Cyrus was one of these Spartan's that had the extra flare ONI liked so about a decade ago he had been conscripted into ONI's ranks and now worked classified operations for them full time. According to the

official record he had gone MIA on Harvest. As much as many members of the higher ups in ONI hated Halsey's Spartan II's they appreciated what value it was to have one on board, especially one as skilled as Cyrus.

The Spartan's talents had been displayed the first time they brought him aboard, they kept him in the dark just as they were doing now with the other Spartans they were collecting, but S142 had managed to hack into the ships systems from a terminal in his cabin, he learned all about the UNSC Omaha, the mission he was originally going to be given and even learned intimate details about ONI's chain of command. Cyrus often thought maybe of the reasons they had not let him back into the marine core was the fact he simply knew too much, but this knowledge kept him in a state of power.

That's how ONI liked to exert themselves, keeping you completely lost so they could spoon feed you, but they couldn't keep much from Cyrus usually, if it was on the system he could find it. But this was one of those rare cases where Cyrus had been kept in the dark, he had tried to follow the paper trail but there wasn't one, there wasn't even a data trail, all documents were completely blacklisted, he had simply been told to select a team of four Spartan's including himself, this operation was being kept completely watertight.

Cyrus watched as the black pelican pulled alongside the UNSC Omaha and waited for a moment, he imagined that in the pilot's eyes the ship was near invisible, the Omaha was one of the prides of ONI, a Prowler, second only in size, tech and weaponry to the UNSC Point of No Return, headquarters of the elusive Section III. The Omaha was nearly undetectable in normal circumstances even to Covenant ships with the most advanced scanners, like a silent bird of prey it hung in the air, often striking at Covenant ships and disabling them before they could even fire a broadside in return. As he looked further he saw the side of the Omaha open and the Pelican silently glide into the hanger bay, the double doors closed behind it and immediately he could hear the rumble of the Prowlers engines fire up, they were moving away already.

Cyrus left the balcony of the observation deck and dropped down into the bridge pit where Captain Loeb was barking orders to his crewmen with a distinct sense of urgency. In fact the whole operation had a sense of urgency, cobbled together in just a couple of days with absolute secrecy, Cyrus had been made to select Spartans for his team in just a matter of hours, he would have liked to take more time and pick them more carefully but it would have to do. The Spartan made his way towards the bridge's pneumatic doors, the two ensigns guarding the door clicked their boot heels on the metal floor and saluted as the entry parted with a whoosh. Cyrus saluted them back and walked through. The ensign's gesture wasn't a salute simply out of respect for him though, in his time with ONI Cyrus had risen through the ranks quite rapidly, he now found himself a Lieutenant Commander, reaching a rank of this level was unprecedented for Spartan's in the public forces, but Cyrus wore his officer bars with pride. The Spartan stepped into the lift at the end of the well-lit hallway that led away from the bridge; he keyed in the level of the hanger bay and felt the surge of momentum as the lift dropped. There was a loud buzz from the pager on his belt, he unclipped it and read the message, it was a message that let him know it was time to gather up his three recruits, things were moving.

Stood in the hanger bay with two ONI lieutenants was the tall figure of a Spartan, his dark green MJOLNIR armour bore hundreds of scuffs, burns and battle scars, his HAZOP helmet had numerous half-cocked modifications strapped to it and was just as scarred as the rest of his battle suit. This must have been Ivan-015 Cyrus thought as he stepped out of the lift onto the polished floor of the hanger, he looked just as you would expect for a Spartan of his reputation, battle hardened and battle weary, the lieutenant commander did wonder if it was best he requisition the Spartan with a new set of MJOLNIR armour, but he knew that some of these front-line guys did get very attached to their suits.

Cyrus had read Ivan's profile, both military and psychological, the entry from his most recent commander referred to him as a warhorse, implying his impeccable endurance and strength, but you could read into it as him also being a tad on the dim side for a Spartan at least. Cyrus had read that Ivan's last deployment before being returned to Circumstance had been on the now glassed UNSC colony of Taranto, the Spartan had returned to the surface while the planet was being glassed and helped liberate a packed civilian spaceport from covenant bombardment saving thousands of lives, there were even unconfirmed reports that he had taken down a scarab single handed, such a thing was unheard of.

Cyrus would not deny it, Ivan 's record was strong, excellent in fact, but the fact still reminded he was very much an everyman type of Spartan, Cyrus could guess that behind the bronzed visor of his helmet the other Spartan's visor his face that of a bulldog chewing a wasp, he must have hated every minute of being in ONI's presence. Cyrus walked over towards the black pelican, he best get things underway he thought. As he strode towards them he noticed Ivan look up at him and Cyrus imagined they had made eye contact.

"Pleasure to meet you Ivan-015" Cyrus extended his hand, the Spartan wavered for a moment before shaking it, squeezing hard.

"Likewise" Ivan said but then he must have noticed the officer bars on Cyrus's black tunic as he curtly added "sir"

"Indeed, well I am..."

"You're a Spartan thats who" Ivan said, looking Cyrus up and down "Even out of the MJOLNIR and wrapped up in all of that officer finery you can always tell when someone is a Spartan, plus you have a firm grip"

"Indeed" Cyrus said again "I am Cyrus-142, ONI Lieutenant Commander, I am the one who was in charge of conscripting you for this operation"

"I see, I thought the ONI types didn't like us IIs" Ivan gestured a telling nod towards the two lieutenants stood beside the Pelican.

"They like those who are useful to them I think you will find. Now if you will please follow me" Cyrus beckoned Ivan and the two began to walk across the hanger back to the elevator, Ivan's boots sending heavy clanks ringing around the large bay.

"So" Ivan continued as he pulled off his custom HAZOP helmet "What's

led you to bring me all the way to this here ship"

"If I am honest with you" Cyrus said as he tapped the button to call the elevator "I don't know either"

"Oh" Ivan sighed, "Well thats a good start"

5. The Office of the Admiralty

****Epsilon Eridani System, UNSC Omaha, October 25 2539****

Little more than twenty four hours ago Maximilian had been sat in the cramped hanger bay aboard the Phoenix Class Colony Ship the UNSC Prestige, rubbing shoulders with tired, battered marines and tear streaked evacuees from the now glassed planet of Valais. But he had been forced to leave what he felt was his rightful place standing with these people by a pair of ONI officers who appeared in a dark pelican which had then taken him aboard this ship.

Maximilian now found himself sitting in a clean and well lit room on an exceedingly plush leather chair, waiting to find out why he had been brought here. As requested Maximilian had ditched his standard issue Mark V armour and now was wearing his military formal best, the dark grey double breasted tunic and slacks with high and shined leather boots, across his chest he bore numerous medals and awards.

Maximilian's supreme tactical and strategic thinking was way beyond that of nearly all Spartans and most officers too, it was something that had won him much praise and respect, as well as they accolades that he wore with pride across his chest. On his lapel Maximilian bore the chevrons and eagle emblem of a Senior Chief Officer , a rank which he had earned and held with high esteem. There was some talk of battled about by officials that he rescued from Valais while they were all aboard the UNSC Prestige about he finally being made a Master Chief, but it appeared that would have to wait.

Maximilian looked up as the double doors on one side of the circular room parted, a blonde haired woman walked through carrying a particularly confident and almost playful gait. Immediately Maximilian recognised her as a Spartan and stood up, he looked her up and doing seeing if he could spot any clues as to who she was, processing all the bits of information that he could spy. The lady Spartan wore the same dark grey attire that Maximilian did and upon her breast there were medals, even though they were noticeably fewer than those that he held, and her lapels bore the emblem of a Petty Officer First Class.

Maximilian studied her further as she approached, he could make out no details about her from her uniform immediately, but then he stared at her medals for a split second longer and noticed that one of her decorations was the blue and orange ribbon of a Colonial Cross. Maximilian himself had one, as a number Spartans, but he ran through a list in his mind of all the female Spartans who had them, there was a total of 11 he could remember. Then the Spartan thought about their ranks and then deduced that only 3 of those who held them were Petty Officer First Class, Joanna-076, Rebecca-108 and Carris -137. He knew she wasn't Joanna for he had known her well, they had both been part of the now disbanded Spartan battle-group Gold Team and seen out the

first decade of the war fighting at each others side. But he had not seen her in years and the last he heard she was now listed as MIA following Sixth Fleet's destruction during the glassing of Lys. With that possibility firmly shut out Maximilian knew this woman striding across the room had to be either Rebecca or Carris, he thought but he had nothing, but he decided to take a stab in the dark.

"Good Morning Rebecca" Maximilian said.

"Oh" Rebecca said with a hint of surprise in her voice "You know my name, how charming, but sorry I can't say I know who you are"

"Maximilian-055" He said shaking her hand before inviting her to take a seat, he felt very pleased with himself that he had managed to correctly deduce who she was, even if it did depend on one last roll of the dice.

"Thanks" She said, "I have heard of you Max now I think about it, weren't you responsible for putting down the rebel insurrection on New Budapest?"

"Ahah, you heard correct" Maximilian laughed bashfully scratching the back of his head, the Insurrection on New Budapest was something that Maximilian had become famed for early in his career.

On many planets the rebels had used the Human-Covenant War as an opportunity to try and overthrow the colonies whose military forces were stretched to breaking point and New Budapest had been no exception. The rebel forces took over the capital city of Danube in a few short and bloody days of fighting and soon enough they controlled the planet. Maximilian was responsible to lead the strike team into Danube. In an attempt to stop the revolt at its root, he had scaled the side of a high-rise the rebels had taken as their headquarters and assassinated all the members of their leadership quickly and quietly. As chaos spread through the insurrectionist's ranks and infighting spread, a small number of ODSI squads under his command had retaken the city and a matter of weeks later the whole planet had been brought under UNSC control once again. The Spartan did not really feel as if this was anywhere near what he would think was his greatest tactical achievement but when the Spartan II Program went public this is the one the Section III ONI propaganda smiths jumped on and ran with.

"So" Rebecca said brushing a few strands of her hair out of her eyes, "Have you been roped into this as well?"

"Unfortunately yes, I was helping with the evacuation on Valais when I was called up" Maximilian replied "Somehow I think I could be doing more good there than here"

"I guess" Rebecca said "But while I hate having to be brought at here at their beckon call I'm assuming it's something important. any ideas?"

"Not a clue, they haven't told me anything"

"Same" Rebecca sunk deeper back into her chair, Maximilian could tell she was feeling particularly uncomfortable in this environment of

complete information black out.

Before Maximilian could say some comforting words to her the doors that she had entered the room by slipped open once again and another two Spartans entered the room. The first was clad in the black uniform of an ONI officer, well decorated and bearing the gold barred patch of a Lieutenant Commander. The Spartan's face was rather gaunt with a well defined and pointed jaw line, thin lips and heavy green eyes. Maximilian felt that while he could tell that he was a Spartan from his proportions he didn't exactly look much like a soldier. The other Spartan following him was still wearing a set of mottled green MJOLNIR armour that looked like it had been through the ringer; it was covered in scuffs, scrapes and scratches. The man was colossal even by Spartan standards, he stood a head taller than the other spartan and ,while that was exaggerated slightly by his armour, he was built like a grizzly bear in; carrying his HAZOP helmet under his arm revealing his unshaven and scared features beneath a bald head.

"Good Day" The Lieutenant Commander said. The tall Spartan simply gave a nod in greeting.

"Good Day to you too" Maximilian said "I am..."

The ONI Officer cut him off "Senior Chief Petty Officer Maximilian-055, it's a pleasure to meet you" He then turned to Rebecca "The same goes for you Petty Officer First Class Rebecca-108

"The pleasure is all yours" Rebecca said curtly leaving the ONI Spartan taken slightly aback.

"I assume you are the man behind this operation. Hence the ONI uniform" Maximilian said quickly to break any fast building tension.

"You are partly correct, I am Lieutenant Commander Cyrus-142. I am the one responsible for calling you here to the Omaha, but I was merely given that duty from Command. I am a member of the operational team, as are you and my armoured friend here is our fourth, Petty Officer Second Class Ivan-015" The ONI Spartan exposted

Maximilian recognised the name Cyrus-142. Digging back into his memory he was sure that he had heard the name Cyrus mentioned as one of the Spartans to have gone MIA during the Harvest Campaign. Normally he would have pushed for details but he didn't really want to quiz the commander or question it, this was ONI there were dealing with now, if they wanted everyone to think a Spartan was MIA they could make it happen in a heartbeat.

"Then if you are not even in charge, do you even know why you had to call us here?" Rebecca said, not trying in the slightest to hide her irritation.

"No I do not, but we shall all find out soon enough. Admiral Crane should be with us any moment now"

"Hmph" Ivan grunted as he dropped his pack onto the clean white floor with a heavy thud "If you had told me we had to wait, I could have got changed"

6. Admiral Crane

****En-route***** Slip-space UNSC Omaha, October 25 2539******

"I thought I remembered your name! You were that crazy bastard who took down a Hunter with a combat knife during the Second Battle of Utgard weren't you!" Ivan said with a broad grin.

"Ha, you got that right" Maximilian laughed "I got lucky, the marines had already wounded it, I just finished the job"

"Yeah you finished job alright, why didn't you just shoot the damned thing?"

"I was running low, thought it best to save ammo"

Ivan laughed a great hearty laugh that made the sofa let out a nervous creak under the weight of his armour.

"You crazy bastard" He sighed again before turning to Rebecca "So Bec, what's your best kill?"

It had been years since anyone had called her 'Bec' it brought a slight smile to Rebecca's face. Being an EVA Specialist Rebecca was mainly shipped out to be attached to one starship or another as they traversed deep-space, engagingly in primarily solo operations and she could not remember that last time she got to work with other Spartans. When you are the only Spartan on a starship, she knew better than most that after awhile it can get slightly lonely. Normally the marines said little to her apart from 'Yes Ma'am' and she guessed that they naturally felt slightly intimidated by her, hell she was taller than most of them and could snap any of them like a twig, while they respected her, she never had the pleasure of talking to anyone who considered her an equal. To most of the marines and swabbies she was some kind of silent protector, someone outside of their sphere, when she felt particularly low she wondered if they even considered her a person. It was nice to be back with her own kind again, people who she could talk to without worrying that they feared her.

"Oh I have some good ones" Rebecca said "But for me I think its gotta be when I hijacked a Phantom during the skirmish over Biko and drove the thing straight into the bridge of a Covenant frigate"

"You're just as bad as him" Ivan grinned, pointing to Maximilian who was also listening intently, Cyrus was stood slightly away from the three seated Spartans and was seemingly taking little interest in their conversation.

Rebecca liked to think of herself a fairly good judge of character but she could not get a read on Cyrus. They had been waiting for this Admiral who was supposed to have met them for quite some time now and yet while her, Ivan and Maximilian made small talk and exchanged a few stories Cyrus had said very little apart from occasionally passing on information. She knew he was their superior, being the only officer in the room and significantly outranking all of them, and sometimes in the marine core officers did not like to mix with those they considered grunts, but with Spartans there normally was at

least some level camaradie between them, but he showed nothing and just stood apart stone faced.

"Well I had gone EVA" Rebecca continued, putting her uncomfortable thoughts about the Lieutenant Commander aside "All hell was breaking loose around us..." But before she could finish there was the unmistakable electrical whoosh of the elevator doors opening.

"Admiral on Deck!" Cyrus shouted firmly.

All of the other Spartans instinctively shot to their feet and joined Cyrus in standing erect, snapping to attention and saluting. Out of the elevator stepped a very stern looking man in a white uniform and peaked cap, bearing all of the gold epaulettes and other paraphernalia that his station commanded. Everything about him was neat and polished from his boots to the top of his hat; Rebecca couldn't help think he looked like a bit of a stiff-neck. Despite any harbouring discontent Rebecca sometimes felt when dealing with the formalities and ceremony of the chain of command she was smart enough to know not when to push someone's buttons too much. Admirals were some of the highest ranking and most powerful officials in the whole the UNSC, one word over the edge and he could have any other them court marshalled in an instant, and this one in particular looked like he was not ready for any nonsense.

"At ease" The Admiral said

"Good to see you again sir" Cyrus said

"You too Commander" The Admiral nodded shaking the officer's hand before turning to others "And these must be your strike team"

"That they are sir"

The Admiral stood silent for a moment and gave them a brief look over.

"Good. Are you sure they will do the job?"

"Yes sir"

"Designations?"

"Ivan -015, Maximilian -055 and Rebecca -108, sir"

"Well then, I hope you three are up to grade"

Rebecca felt insulted.

"I am Admiral Augustus Crane and I am in charge on this operation. You answer only to Commander Cyrus and he answers to me. Is that clear"

"Yes sir" The three Spartans said in unison

"You are with ONI now and for this mission you are completely off the record, none of this is happening and officially everything I am about to tell you is untrue. Is that clear"

"Yes sir" They said again

"To speak of anything you experience in this operation to anyone beyond those that I give permission to is treason. Is that clear?"

Once again, they responded in kind.

"Excellent"

The Admiral moved over to one of the wall panels and flicked up a sheet of the white plastic to reveal a control panel, he keyed in a number of commands and codes before a thin blue light shined across his eyes, a retinal scan. An automated voice spoke over a loud speaker and simply said 'clearance authorised' before a table with its top covered in a network of criss-crossed glassed squares rose out of the floor with a quiet hum. The Spartans watched in silence as Crane keyed in another series of commands and soon the squares on the table lit up and above them began to appear the blue light structures of a hologram.

"This is your mission brief Spartans" Crane said as the floating networks of light began to take shape. Rebecca recognised them quickly, they were the outlines of UNSC ships "As I am sure you are aware, a number of years ago the UNSC enacted The Cole Protocol that requires any UNSC ships returning to major population centres to jump first to a random location and then to their intended destination"

Rebecca of course knew this order very well having worked on starships for the vast majority of her career, it was designed by Admiral Preston Cole as a method of preserving the human colonies that were still standing since the Covenant had displayed the ability to be able to track slipspace jumps, if the ship first jumps to some random set of co-ordinates it made them harder to track. While the protocol to some felt like martial law as it majorly limited free slipspace travel for civilians the initial concerns about personal freedom were easy to put aside when you considered the consequences of if a Covenant ship traced your slipspace vector back to your home colony.

"For the most part this has gone off without issue. Normally ships end up in some uncharted part of deep space and simply continue on their destination with no other concerns apart from a slight delay" Crane continued, walking his way around the hologram in the centre of the room. "But it appears that one of our jumps has gone awry"

"Have we lost a ship sir?" Cyrus said

"No Cyrus, I wish that were the case" The Admiral said, Rebecca was surprised he didn't snap at the Spartan but it was apparent the two knew each other well, she imagined if any of the others had interrupted they would have been shouted down quite quickly.

The hologram behind the Admiral began to expand and reveal the shapes of a number of other ships and their designations. Rebecca recognised all the shapes as if they were old friends, the classic unmistakable silhouettes of UNSC warships, but as she scanned through their names and allotted classifications she began to feel a knot tie tight in her stomach, all of them were listed as missing.

"We haven't lost a ship, we have lost a whole god damned fleet" Crane spat.

"How can you lose a fleet?" Rebecca blurted out in shock, encouraging the Admiral's face to contort into a scowl.

"That's what you are going to find out for us S108" Crane said "Now if you please let me continue Petty Officer"

"Yes sir. Sorry sir" Rebecca said like clockwork.

"Sixth Fleet was part of the defence of Lys in the Outer Colonies. But unfortunately it was a battle we could not win, Lys was dam important in our production chain, it was a shame to lose it, so the remnants of Sixth Fleet were ordered to retreat"

Crane hit a switch on the control pad and the holographic images of the fleet were whisked away and replaced by one of a star map with one sector marked with a ring.

"Sixth Fleet made a slipspace jump together to a part of space we assumed uninhabited and arrived in this sector here" Crane pointed to the one highlighted on the map "This is their last recorded position before they dropped completely off any UNSC scope. Eighteen ships, gone in an instant, without a single transmission or warning beacon deployed. What makes this situation even more dire though is that the fleet's flagship, Together We Rise, was carrying an AI. As it states in the Cole Protocol '_Destruction or capture of a shipboard AI is absolutely unacceptable_e' and for her to fall into Covenant hands could turn the tide of the war"

"So the story that Sixth Fleet had been wiped out defending Lys was a cover sir?" Maximilian said flatly.

"Well of course Spartan" Crane said bluntly, Rebecca knew that constructing a web of lies and propaganda must have been second nature to him.

"We couldn't hide such a disappearance of ships, such a thing is unprecedented" Crane continued

Before Maximilian could speak again Cyrus cut across "What are we dealing with then sir?"

"Honestly Cyrus, we have no damned idea. We expect Covenant. Originally we theorised that Sixth Fleet had just got worst of the odds and jumped straight into a Covenant battle group or appeared near one of their more well armed installations and been destroyed but that does not explain how they would fall off the grid without a single transmission"

"Quite right sir" Cyrus said

"But this is where you come in Spartans, we are sending you to the last recorded location of Sixth Fleet and you are going to find out what the hell happened to our ships"

"So you have no idea what we are dealing with?" Ivan snorted

"No"

"Well you are the Office of Naval Intelligence, isn't Intel what your pay-checks are for?"

"Know your place Spartan" Crane hissed "We will be outfitting you as best we can"

Rebecca felt a large surge of anger welling up inside her and she couldn't help herself, she said "So you are sending us in completely blind and judging by what happened to the fleet, you might be sending us to our deaths?"

"On every mission you might be sent to your death Spartan"

"On most missions I at least have a fighting chance and know who I am pointing my rifle at"

"You over step your bounds Spartan" The Admiral clenched and was starting to become very red in the face.

"Sounds like this is something ONI should be dealing with, your agents seem more suited to this then wasting a team of Spartans" Ivan cut in

"Exactly" Rebecca agreed

"Don't you think we have already tried that?" Crane growled, before removing his cap and smoothing his thinning brown hair down slightly in an attempt to calm himself. The admiral sighed took a breath and continued "Our first plan of action was to send one of our Prowlers, which we of course did. The Romero was dispatched just over a week ago as soon as we had confirmed Sixth Fleet's disappearance, we haven't heard from it since"

"I see" Cyrus said "So what is our brief sir?"

"It is simple Cyrus. Get in, find out what the hell has happened to Sixth Fleet, try to recover the AI and get the hell out of there. I know I haven't given you much and some of you" He glared at the Rebecca, Ivan and Maximilian "May have your qualms and doubts about our methods, but we are trying our best to make sure that you will be successful in your mission and you have your orders. We need to go in quick and quiet with a small team and you II's are the best we have. If the Covenant have a weapon that can disable our ships without a moments notice then everything we know about modern naval warfare changes. I need not tell you the stakes are high, and you must not fail, for the sake of every man, woman and child"

"Do not worry sir" Cyrus said "I will make sure we get it done"

"I trust you will Cyrus, you are our best man and I will reserve judgement on your choices in squad until the job is done"

Rebecca considered rising to this jab but decided she would rather just leave it lie, best not get on her CO's bad-side even more than she already had. While she had her worries about the mission and may put on a slight front of reluctance, Rebecca knew she would do what she needed to and she would try her best to make sure they found out

what on earth was happening in that sector. Being herself a swabbie for the most part, she thought the idea of the Covenant having a weapon that could take their ships out of commission with a single punch, was absolutely terrifying and of course if the covvies got their scaly hands on an AI, it could be the beginning of the end for man.

7. Scimitar

****En-route****** Slip-space UNSC Omaha, October 26 2539******

"I'm sorry Spartan. Your armour does not meet ONI tech specifications. I am going to have to requisition you another set before you are deployed" Lieutenant Cartwright said, stopping Ivan as he made his way to the Omaha's hanger bay.

While it had been nearly a day since the meeting with Crane it still had left Ivan with a poor taste in his mouth, he would do his duty for the sake of mankind but he would not let these ONI types dictate to him any longer.

"You see this here?" Ivan said, tapping the gouge mark on one of bulky shoulder pads "Siege of Taranto. Pelican I was riding in went down. Held off the covvies for three hours till evac showed up, needless to say they got a couple of hits on target, but I got more"

"Very impressive Spartan, but stillâ€¦" Cartwright trailed off, he had caught Ivan's iron stare.

Ivan untucked his helmet from under his arm and tenderly gestured to a scratch mark that ran raggedly across the cranium to the jaw

"I got this during the Harvest Campaign" He went on " Some Elite thought it would be a good idea came at me with an energy sword, I caught his strike just in time, but he left his mark. Crushed his forearm and beat him into the dirt after that though, sorry way to go"

The officer and the Spartan stood silent for a moment; Ivan could tell he hadn't made his point yet.

"How about this one" Ivan ran his finger along a ridge of buckled blast damage that ran across his chest piece "Jericho VII, I joined up with a squad of marines as we stalked across the field to try and take out an AA gun. Little did we know we were being watched and soon enough we were pinned in a muddy crater. I took point but a grunt decided to take his chances and lobed a grenade our way. The thing landed in the middle of the squad primed and ready, I grabbed the thing and tried to send it back their way but nearly as soon as I let go the thing went off. A couple more seconds later I would have lost my goddam arm"

Cartwright remained silent.

"I don't have many medals, I don't really want any. These are my medals. Each one is both a badge of honour and a lesson, every time I get hit or something goes bad, I learn a lesson and every lesson makes me better than before. It's nice to have the reminders"

Ivan stooped forward so he brought his towering form down to eyelevel with the lieutenant; he could see the man had fear in his eyes.

"I don't give a dam about no tech specifications or ONI standards; you ain't taking my armour from me" Ivan growled, never once relenting from his eye contact.

"Yesâ€|yes of course" Cartwright stuttered, backing slightly away from the Spartan "Carry on"

"Thank you" Ivan smiled, giving the man a relatively gentle slap on the arm that still left him stumbling slightly.

"The Admiral and Lieutenant Commander expect you in the hanger bay in fifteen Spartan" Cartwright said, trying to regain his composure and nervously wiping his brow under his cap "Don't be late"

"Where do you think I 'm going now?"

"Of courseâ€|sorryâ€|I must go"

And with that Cartwright scurried off with his tail between his legs and left Ivan alone once more. Ivan couldn't blame the man for trying, he was a young officer and was obviously new to the game, while ONI liked to keep complete control over their conscripts there was nothing any silver-tongued spook could say that would make Ivan part with his trusted assault armour. On the battlefield you closest comrade is your armour, you trust it to keep you safe, to not baulk under even the heaviest fire, there was no way Ivan was going to plunge into the unknown without knowing he could trust the plates he wore.

Ivan continued thudding his way down the well-lit corridors of the Omaha, a number of other ONI officers and staff passed him but they spoke no words and gave the giant Spartan a particularly wide birth. Ivan didn't care, he had only been on this ship for just over a day and already he understood that they did not like outsiders. Aside from his fellow Spartans, the admiral and poor Lieutenant Cartwright, hardly anyone had said more than two words to him and constantly eyed him with distrust.

Ivan was slightly annoyed that he still had no idea when they would be shipping out, after their meeting with the admiral, he, Rebecca and Maximilian had been plunged into the dark once again as Cyrus and Crane had scarpered off together to apparently make things ready for them. Ivan would be more than happy to get off this dammed ship and he hated waiting around treading water, especially when the stakes of their operation were apparently so very high. But he expected that this apparent briefing would possibly start the ball rolling, why else ask your Spartans to turn up in their power armour?

After a brief detour in which he accidentally bowled the ship's mess hall, Ivan soon found himself in the ships wide hangar bay. Standing in centre were the other three Spartans, all in full armour as had been requested. Maximilian wore a suit of the standard issue Mark IV that was the same dark grey as Ivan's, it looked well-travelled but still well presented; the Senior Chief had made the effort. Rebecca's was a light grey, almost white, and of the orangey gold domed EVA variant, still sporting noticably fresh char marks obviously from a

recent combat mission. The Lieutenant Commander wore a set of matte black armour of the Commando variant, carrying the helmet tucked under his arm. It looked brand new. Ivan crossed the flightdeck and joined his fellow Spartans.

"What's the good word?" Ivan said as he joined them.

"Not much to tell, we are still waiting on Crane" Maximilian answered

"I should have expected that" Ivan sighed pulling off his helmet, prompting the others to do the same.

"Nice of him to keep us waiting when so much is riding on this mission" Rebecca said

"He will be here 108" Cyrus cut in sternly "He will have a good reason for keeping us waiting"

"How do you know _142_?" Rebecca spat venomously

"ONI always does. And need I remind you that I am your commanding officer, so keep your attitude in check 108"

"Of course" Rebecca said, noticeably trying to suppress a groan of frustration before adding "Sir"

"Good" Cyrus said "I expect the same of both of you 055 and 015"

Neither of the other Spartan's spoke in return.

Ivan liked Rebecca; she was not afraid to speak her mind and wasn't putting up with any of this cloak and dagger bullshit that ONI was trying to pull on them. She seemed tenacious, quite an important trait on the battlefield, he looked forward to fighting alongside her.

While Rebecca though was very rough around the edges Maximilian seemed very much the clean-cut type. Ivan thought they he was nice enough and though he may not have been as brash as Rebecca, he struck him as the type to always fight his corner and not take anything he didn't like lying down. Judging by his massive array of medals he had sported on his dress fatigues and from what Ivan had been lucky enough to witness on Harvest, he also must have been a hell of a soldier.

As for Cyrus though, Ivan didn't know what to make of him, he seemed three parts spy to one part soldier he wasn't exactly acting like their brother in arms. Obviously he was taking his role and rank very seriously indeed. Ivan really thought he was acting like some kind of fresh out the academy officer out to make a name for himself than a Spartan.

"Attention!" Cyrus suddenly shouted sternly, leading to the three other Spartans to snap to it in a heartbeat.

Ivan spied across the hanger bay that Admiral Crane had entered, flanked by two other seemingly faceless agents in matching black uniforms. They crossed the flight-deck with haste; Ivan knew things

must have been moving.

"Spartans, follow me" Crane said sharply before turning on his boot heels and starting back across the hanger.

The Spartans all obeyed and followed without question, soon they had left the hanger and were crammed into one of the Omaha's elevators once more. Ivan watched the digit counter above the door fall as the elevator descended and quickly it slowed to a stop and they were moving through the ship once more.

"What is going on sir?" Cyrus finally asked as they followed the Admiral and his men's brisk stride.

"We are dropping out of slipspace and you four need to be prepped and deployed" Crane replied

"Isn't it a little risky to take the Omaha into this sector if so many ships have gone MIA?"

"We aren't. We are dropping out over Naupactus, from there you will head on alone"

"Sir?"

"All will become clear Cyrus"

They passed through a set of doors that opened with an exhale of air and found themselves on a deck that was a small room with an airlock on the far side. Crane gestured to one of his men and the ONI agent pressed a switch on a control panel near the door prompting a slight groan as a mechanism began to move. Ivan and the other Spartans watched as the far wall began to slide back revealing a thick perspex view screen that looked out onto nothing but blackness and the nothingness of slipstream space.

"The nature of this mission requires speed and stealth" Crane said turning to the Spartans "We don't know what you will be encountering when you arrive in the operations zone but we are trying our best to ensure your success and to give you access to the best tech available"

Ivan felt the ship shudder slightly and could hear the residual whine of the drive core begin to fade. When there was merely blackness the world through the observation panel suddenly flashed into life as the prowler exited slip space nearby a small grey and desolate looking planet surrounded by rings of asteroids. Quickly the planet and its rings grew larger as the Omaha swiftly approached.

Drawing nearer Ivan spied a large metallic object floating in the asteroid belt. As it came into view he recognised it as a UNSC station similar to the ones he had seen in orbit on large hub worlds like Reach. But getting closer still the shape become more distinct and he could see that a number of Prowlers were docked along the station's large spindly arms and a number of small tugs buzzed around them.

"The planet you see before you is Naupactus, an uncolonised and rather unpleasant little world" Crane continued "But the station you see in the asteroid belt is Orbital 7, one of our staging and refit

stations that we have located just outside human controlled space. This one in particular is used also for testing of experimental spacecraft, one of which we plan on entrusting to you for this mission"

The prowler drew closer and slowed, cruising cautiously between the assortment of docking arms and stationary spacecraft that were swarming with drones and mechanics in space suits as they were patched up and made ready for redeployment. The Omaha finally slowed to a stop and Ivan could hear the electronic whirr as the prowler extended its docking tube. There was a fairly loud crash as the tube connected and locked in with Orbital 7. Crane made his way across to the airlock and one of his men keyed in a code prompting it to pop open and reveal the ribbed tube that now connected the ship's environment to that of the station.

Crane led once more at a swift pace as they crossed through the tube and into Orbital 7. They were greeted on the other side by a dark skinned man with a bald head and goatee, wearing a grey uniform with the black and gold epaulettes of a captain; he instantly saluted as Crane stepped across the threshold.

"We did not expect you so soon sir" The Captain said

"Time of the essence Mr. Lebane. At ease" Crane said, not stopping as he walked past the officer.

Lebane dropped his salute and hastily caught up with the admiral and the rest of the party.

"Is the Scimitar prepped and ready?" Crane asked as they continued on.

"We are just need to run the final simulation through the drive core. That should take about five hours sir" Lebane replied, trying to keep pace with the older man and the Spartan's strides.

"Unacceptable" Crane said "You will cancel it, we launch ASAP"

"But sir..."

"No buts Captain. We need to deploy now. Every moment we waste puts that AI in danger. You know what it says in the Cole Protocol"

"Yes sir, but still, she's not ready"

"What did I just say Captain?"

"Sir please"

"I said no buts"

Lebane's shoulders slumped in defeat "Of course sir. Follow me"

Soon the Spartan's found them in another hangar bay, but this one was nearly the height and width of a stadium. Ivan was impressed. Despite its size though only one ship was sitting docked, a sleek arrow shaped craft with long elongated angled wings and tail. Just before the angling of the wings on either side were two large engines, one mounted above and one beneath. Out of its belly popped a ramp and

whole body of the ship was painted a metallic black glinted underneath the hangar's bright floodlights. Ivan thought it resembled a larger version of the UNSC Shortsword bomber or Broadsword Interceptor, he had never seen anything like this before. He guessed this was one of the experimental craft that they tested here and he grinned when he thought that this beast would be the one that they had been assigned, it looked like it packed a hell of a punch.

They walked across the hangar and soon were upon the craft. Surrounding it there was a buzz of activity as a number of technicians and mechanics busied themselves make slight alterations to the craft. Many were reinserting and retightening missing panels that revealed complex networks of tubes, cables and a number of other mechanisms that sat beneath the bodywork. Technicians ran up and down the ships ramp, wheeling numerous banks of computers off that they had obviously been using to test the craft's systems. Everyone working of ship was working double time.

"Spartans, admiral" Captain Lehane said, "I would like to introduce you to the D-45 RISC, or as it's more colloquially known, the Scimitar"

"It looks pretty impressive Captain" Crane nodded "Why don't you give our team the rundown"

"Yes sir" Lehane said "Spartans, if you will follow me please"

The team gathered around the captain and he led them up the craft's wide ramp into its cargo bay. A number of technicians were still working inside and there was the fizz and flash of a blowtorch as a mechanic worked on one of the benches of seats that lined either side. In the centre of the cargo bay, held by a clamp on the ceiling, was a Warthog that Spartan's filed around. Ivan had seen enough ships laid out like this in his time, it had obviously been designed as some kind of dropship.

"RISC stands for Rapid-Insertion-Stealth-Carrier" Lehane exposted, his demeanour noticeably lighter than when he had been in the company of the admiral "This baby has been designed to for when we need to get behind enemy lines or into a hot zone without drawing attention to ourselves"

"So it's a glorified Pelican?" Rebecca asked with a somewhat disappointed frown on her face.

"In a way" Lehane said with a slight grin "But it's more than that. It doesn't take much to spruce up a pelican and make it harder to detect, that's one of things we do here actually, ONI always seems to be losing them. But the Scimitar has been designed to be the quickest and the quietest thing we have"

Lehane led them up a short set of stairs and into the cabin. It was rather spacious, with seating for five; one pilot and then four technician's stations that for the moment lay dormant. The large panoramic window for the moment looked out onto the hangar and Ivan could see a mechanic on a harness working away at something on the craft's stub nose. The mechanic gawked as the Spartan's entered and when he noticed Ivan had seen him he quickly averted his gaze and went back to his work, nervously trying to avoid eye contact with them.

"The principle this craft is built around is simple. Small is fast and small is stealthy" Lebane said as ran his hand across the pilot's dash.

"It doesn't seem particularly small if it's supposed to be an insertion vehicle" Maximilian said sceptically as he looked over the banks of computers that lined each wall.

"That's were your wrong Spartan" Lebane said "All the miniaturization has been with the internal workings. This aircraft is equipped with a fully operational slipspace unit and active camouflage system"

"Very impressive Captain" Cyrus said

"This project has cost the UNSC a ridiculous amount of money but since the beginning of the war we have been experimenting with trying to shrink the size of the slipspace and active camo systems, looking to create a fast and stealthy strike craft capable of interstellar flight. And now, this is what we have come up with. It can't jump the distance of a capital ship but it jumps what it can faster, a jump of the range that would take about a week in a frigate, this baby can do in three days. Also the stealth systems are much more effective than those you get on Prowlers as the energy signature from such a small ship is so insignificant. In this thing you're pretty much invisible to all long and short range scanners"

"Will these see full operational service?" Maximilian enquired as he studied the cockpit's various control panels.

"I doubt it Spartan even though I hope so. This prototype alone was only possible due to ONI funding and even their purse isn't bottomless, especially with more and more funding having to go to commission new weapons and star ships for the front. Our intention was to study this one and put it through its paces around here to try and figure how to bring the costs down so we can get a squadron in production, but it seems ONI have other ideas"

"It's for the best Captain" Cyrus said curtly "This is exactly the type of craft we need for this operation"

"That's exactly what Crane thought" Lebane looked rather despondent and slightly angry as he spoke "But I guess it's true. She isn't quite finished yet and we had a few upgrades of hardware and software we wanted to install. But she should do just fine, just make sure you bring her back in one piece"

"I will try my best" Cyrus said "But it's dependent on if we come back at all"

There was a very brief awkward silence in the cabin.

"What kind of firepower is she packing?" Ivan said making sure to break it quickly.

"Not an awful lot I am afraid big man" Lebane said with a slight laugh "While the components for the slipspace and stealth drives have been shrunk they still take up a lot of room. So really we could only leave you with triplets of autocannons along each wing and a pair of ASGM missile launchers with capacity for four rockets a

piece. But don't worry too much, we have loaded the ship with as many counter measures that we could stuff in"

"Not going to be much good in a dogfight then" Ivan grumped.

"Come on now. The idea of this craft is to be quick and quiet, the last thing you are going to be doing with it is engaging the covenant at point blank range"

"Sometimes, you don't have the choice"

Ivan knew he was being churlish but he didn't like the idea of being left with so little armament. Stealth and speed could only take you so far and when a covenant corvette picks you up and you can't run and hide fast enough, your only choice is to fight, and there's not much you can do with a few peashooters and a couple of missiles.

"It will do" Cyrus cut in "Thank you Captain"

"No problem Spartan, I don't know exactly what you are gonna be doing, but I'm sure it's serious"

Captain Lebane's somewhat playful attitude he had while introducing them to the ship had faded, he knew the seriousness of what lay ahead for the Spartans, and Ivan was grateful of that.

"Which one of you is going to be the pilot anyway" Lebane said shaking off his brief moment of melancholy.

"That would be Petty Officer Rebecca -108" Cyrus said gesturing to her, leaving the lady Spartan slightly taken aback.

"Wait, you expect me to pilot this thing?" Rebecca scoffed "Sure I can fly most enough anything the UNSC has in service but never anything like this"

"You should be more than capable 108"

Rebecca looked as if she was about to snap but luckily Lebane spoke up again.

"Don't worry ma'am" He said "Our test pilots have said she handles like a Longsword with three times the power and three times the responsiveness. And don't worry about the extra bells and whistles, while ideally she is meant to be crewed by a team of five she can be handled by as little as two"

"Well who wants to be my co-pilot then" Rebecca shrugged disagreeably looking round at the others "Any takers?"

"We already got one for you ma'am" Lebane grinned "Geordie!"

"Good_Morning _Captain" A soft spoken man's voice that seemed to come from everywhere said.

Ivan looked around for a moment but could not discern who spoke. Then just above the pilot's control panel a small surface lit up and a holographic image began to fade into existence. As it became distinct Ivan saw it was the image of a blue sphere made up of numerous

individual icons that floated just above the dash.

"Spartans, this is Geordie, the ship's AI" Lehane said rather pleased with himself.

"An AI?" Cyrus said cautiously "Is that wise sir? We are going on this mission to retrieve an AI, it would be senseless to lose another should we not return"

"Don't worry Spartan, he's not a smart AI, he doesn't have anything that could endanger us and has a self-destruct protocol should he be captured or all the crew of this ship destroyed. Ain't that right Geordie, you're pretty dumb aren't you?"

"I_cannot_operate_outside_my_set_parameters" said Geordie

The particles that made up his chosen shape contorted into a simple two dots and curve smiley face and then faded back into his avatar of a simple sphere.

"He's just here to help you fly the ship. He will monitor all systems and act as the autopilot, but when it gets down to it, you will have the helm ma'am" Lehane said reassuringly to Rebecca.

"Is that right?" Rebecca said moving forward to the AI's avatar.

"Hello" Geordie said as she approached, contorting his avatar into a smiley once again.

"I'm Spartan Rebecca -108" She said, stooping down slightly "And I'm going to be the pilot of this rig"

"It_is_a_pleasure_to_make_your_acquaitance_Spartan_Rebecca_1_0_8_I_will_l_do_whatever_I_can_to_make_our_partnership_pleasant" Geordie said, maintaining his smile.

"I hope so sparks" Rebecca said "You just make sure we get there and I promise I will try not to shake you up too bad"

"Of_course_Spartan_Rebecca_1_0_8_Any_attempts_to_minimize_damage_to_my_circuits_will_be_greatly_appreciated"

Geordie changed his avatar to a concerned smiley and then back to a beaming one once again. Ivan noticed this led Rebecca to let out a small smile.

"If that's all Spartans" Lehane said "I think it's about time we get this show on the road"

Good, Ivan thought.

End
file.